

Chrysler Canada intensifies shop floor harassment

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Last fall, the Detroit Three auto companies and the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union agreed to another draconian concessions deal, further expanding two-tier wage and benefits provisions at Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler in Canada. CAW bureaucrats, who for years have trumpeted the automakers' demands and threats, rammed through these concessions at local union meetings by telling veteran workers that, despite substantial givebacks for all union members, the full brunt of the concessions would fall on the shoulders of workers yet to be hired.

At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that management would use the opening provided by the union to “weed out” the more highly paid first-tier workers: it would intensify shop-floor speed-up, discipline and victimization so as to force them into early retirement or fire them outright. That prognosis has been grimly verified over the past period.

The autumn deals deepened a two-tier wages system introduced in 2009. It reduces new-hire wages another \$4 per hour (to \$20 from \$24) and extends new-hires' time on the second-tier from six years to ten years. Veteran workers, who have had their wages and cost-of-living allowances frozen, currently earn \$34 per hour.

Furthermore, newly hired workers will not have a defined benefits pension plan that guarantees them a fixed pension amount and, for the first time ever in a CAW contract, they must pay substantial premiums into their plan. New employees must now pay \$1 per every hour worked into the new pension scheme, rising to \$1.50 per hour in years five, six and seven and to \$2 per hour in every year employed at the company after that. Thusly, by their eighth year on the job almost 6 percent of their wages will be creamed off to pay the auto bosses' “legacy costs.”

Concessions were also made on work rules and seniority clauses at the local level. These matters, which are often treated as “small potatoes” in press reportage, become particularly important under conditions where the two-tier system is further extended. As aforementioned, the automakers have a major incentive to drive older workers out of the plants so that they can be replaced with new-hires earning cheap-labour wages and benefits.

In plants organized by the UAW in the United States, the loosening of work rules and seniority protections has been used by plant managers to place veteran workers in the most physically taxing jobs, forcing them out through injury or early retirement.

The same is happening in Canada. Chrysler CEO Sergio Marchionne—who in 2009 infamously said U.S. workers had to accept a “culture of poverty” instead of a “culture of

entitlement”—cryptically stated after the signing of last fall's concession deal in Canada that it is “an agreement we can use.”

Recently, a Chrysler Canada worker from Windsor, Ontario contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* to discuss conditions inside his assembly plant and the treacherous role played by union officials. He asked to remain anonymous for fear of victimization. The worker was responding to a recent WSWs article on the introduction of a grueling new work schedule at the Chrysler Warren Stamping plant in Warren, Michigan just over the border from the Windsor facility. That article outlined how Alex Wassell, a worker in the Warren plant, had been fired for protesting the new shift system and demonstrated how the UAW bureaucracy had utterly failed to fight this victimization.

The worker wrote, “In Windsor, Chrysler is targeting all employees over the age of 50, employees who have had temporary or permanent workplace accidents, disease or illness, and workers who have had non-occupational illness, disease or accidents. The CAW is also turning a blind eye to the discrimination and harassment by Chrysler. When asking to file a grievance, they say we don't understand the contract term that Chrysler has violated; or you are a Pennsylvania lawyer stirring up the pot.”

When asked to elaborate on his observations the worker responded with a letter outlining a list of grievances, which he added represent “only some of the problems” faced by Chrysler workers.

On the grievance procedure: “The meeting chairman is an HR rep. The foreman reads a summary of the accusations. In most instances it is a complaint that management did not like that the worker stood up for their rights under the contract, or some Provincial or Federal law. The union then says the worker is right in their action. HR then has the worker and union leave the room. The union rep says outside: ‘I don't know, it does not look good.’ ... The meeting is re-convened. A disciplinary note of 1-30 days suspension sits waiting on the table. HR reads it to the worker, the union protests calmly and the worker is escorted off the property. A grievance is submitted by the union, and if management eventually agrees with the union up to the 4th stage meeting, which can take a year or more, the worker is paid for the missed time. However, even if the worker wins the grievance, the minutes of the harassment form part of the worker's permanent employee record, and can be re-used in the future against the worker. Sometimes the company refuses to settle before the 4th stage. If this happens, say \$10,000,000 of grievance (monies) go to contract

negotiations every 3 years for all grievances at Windsor. At negotiations the company will say we have \$3,000,000 for all grievances. In this case the union picks who will get paid. If you are a favorite, the worker gets 100 percent. If not, well your grievance while valid, was traded for the 'better good'. The process is a sad joke."

On the shift system: "Chrysler periodically threatens multiple start times for each shift, depending on where the worker is scheduled for each day. You never know what day it is, when to sleep, and social life is next to nonexistent for skilled trades. Sometimes a worker will work afternoons and be ordered mid-week to change shifts to days. This leaves less than 8 hours to travel, sleep and eat. The unskilled labourers rotate 2 weeks days, 2 weeks afternoons, then back to days for shift 1 & 2. Shift 3 is locked into steady midnights. However, the skilled trades must work all 3 shifts. Their rotation is midnights 1 month, afternoons 1 month, days one month, then back to midnights. This makes it very difficult to get adequate sleep. The foremen follow the normal day-afternoon-midnight rotation. Chrysler thrives on keeping the workforce harassed, threatened, and bullied. The result in shift changes is that a worker does not perform at 100 percent for a week after the change. This is when management increases discipline against workers. Bad parts or slow work results in 1-3 days suspension."

On Safety: "A worker found a safety issue which could result in electrocution. The issue was reported, but management did not want to perform any maintenance until the weekend. When an email of concern was sent to the safety department, the worker was subsequently suspended on trumped-up charges a few weeks later... Skilled trades must obtain their own coveralls, gloves, etc. from one source in trim and chassis. At one time they used to allow enough material for a week. Then it was changed to a daily function, supposedly to save money. The distance can easily be ½ mile from a workstation to the crib store. Foremen demand that skilled trades obtain the equipment on their own time for free. However, because the crib has different break times, the daily trip can easily take one hour. If the foremen want, they take the skilled tradesman to a discipline meeting, for being 'out of your work area'."

On Illness: "In Ontario, the labour laws say that a worker is allowed so many days off sick per year. However, if a worker misses one day without a doctor note more discipline will come. So, not only do you lose the day's pay for being sick, but you must now go and pay a doctor \$40 for a note saying that you are too sick to go out and should stay home. You are being harassed and discriminated against for being sick, then fined because you must provide the \$40 doctor note. A while back, Chrysler commenced a non-culpable program. If any worker is absent more than their peers then 'you can be disciplined up to and including termination.' They even go as far as posting banners at every exit 'Zero tolerance for injury.' So, if the worker files for WSIB (Workplace Safety Insurance Board, Ontario), they are placed on the non-culpable program for future harassment, discipline or termination."

On Injury: "If a workplace injury results in a worker being sent to the city hospital, the worker is ordered to use a taxi. The doctor

will typically state no work for 24-72 hours. However, Chrysler then demands that the worker return to the nurse station so that she can apply phony work restrictions and order the worker back to work while totally disabled. If the worker obeys the hospital doctor, HR then suspends the worker for 'failing to return to work after a break' even though an injury and trip to a hospital is not a break... Chrysler also regularly refuses to file the Workers' Compensation report of injury form to prevent or delay WSIB benefits to a worker. Because Chrysler is a large employer, WSIB does not fine Chrysler for every refusal to file a form. Thus WSIB plays favoritism with Chrysler."

On Privacy: "Chrysler regularly provides your personal information to car dealers nearest your home. Management then watches to see if you sign up for an employee discount on a car. If you do not drive a Chrysler product to work, the employee must park at the back of the employee parking lot. Workers that cannot afford new cars since 2008 when Canada and the US demanded the unions lower wages an average of 30 percent are told to get their finances in order and prioritize their wages to support a purchase."

On Time-Keeping: "Sometimes the computer system is down, and the employee swipe badges do not work for the time clock. Thus it is up to the foreman's discretion if you get full 8 hours pay for the day. Working during the provincially mandated 15-minute breaks or lunch are regularly forced by management. If the worker refuses, it's off to a discipline meeting again. 1-5 days off for this."

A Conclusion: "The fence around the property has not always been there. The fence is there not to keep the public out, rather it is there to keep control over the workers and prevent them from going across the road to lunch. Internal cafeterias serving food have been closed in body-in-white and paint. But the one beside the union office in trim/chassis remains open."



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